

MUSEOLOGY AND COMMUNICATION WITHIN THE VIRTUAL MUSEUM

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Abstract

Anyone thinks to know what a museum is. However, despite the common thoughts, a museum is an institution which is constantly evolving nowadays. The present work aims to highlight the link between the "museum" entity as an institution and changes in society. This adjustment affects the museum communication. Today, communication is said to be a particular current topic due to social evolution. Indeed, it leads to new challenges arising from globalisation, and new opportunities offered in terms of technological innovation. We live in a historical moment characterised by great social and economic changes that see technology as the main protagonist. So what is the role of this technology in the institution and the "museum" institution? In this paper, we consider the results of the changes in society in terms of technology and how they affect museums and their manners of communication.

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The museum, although considered by many to be a different good from the traditional "consumer good", is a marketing object that, as such, does not escape market laws. In a context characterised by hyper-competition, the museum increasingly focuses on communication, using tools of new technologies, in particular, digital.

In order to achieve this purpose, representing the potential of both interactive museums and virtual museums is helpful. The new way of communication fits with the museum's social function, as highlighted by definition elaborated by the Icom (International Council of Museums), to communicate the knowledge of cultural heritage (tangible and intangible) to people. To this to happen, it is necessary to break down all barriers, not only of a logistical nature but also cultural, sensorial and economic ones. According to this point of view, technology is the tool through which museums can proceed with the communication of one's own heritage. It is both through an onsite museum and an online museum using new methods of communication that goes beyond the traditional "top-down" approach, allowing for a wider audience than in the past.

Because of the new "online" technologies, that is external to the museum, and art is an integral part of the daily life of each of us, and, even unintentionally, has entered the homes (or, better, into smartphones or tablets) of all of us.

Regarding this point issue, some scholars even speak of a "third digital revolution". A first one initially developed in the United States of America, then spread everywhere in the world, involving all sectors, including those linked to cultural heritage and therefore also museums.

A revolution that can be positively deemed if it highlights the idea of sharing (sharing of content with other people, sharing of collections, also of emotions) realised through communication as an opportunity for growth that sees technology as a powerful marketing tool.

Museum and Communication

In order to understand the relationship between the "museum" and communication, it is necessary, first of all, to clarify what is the meaning of the word "museum". According to the definition of the Icom (International Council of Museum), "A museum is a non-profit, permanent institution in the service of society and its development, open to the public, which acquires, conserves, researches, communicates and exhibits the tangible and intangible heritage of humanity and its environment for the purposes of education, study and enjoyment.. " This definition was developed in 1946 and highlighted the institutional goals of the museum: study, education and pleasure. However, this definition was revised in 1974, integrating it with some fundamental elements. According to the new version, in fact, "the museum is a permanent institution, non-profit and open to the public, serving society and its development, which acquires, conserves, researches, communicates and exhibits, for study reasons, education and entertainment, the material culture of man and his environment ". The definition of a museum was subsequently revised also in 1989, following the Assembly which took place in L'Aja city. Therefore, "the museum is a non-profit, permanent institution in the service of society and its development, open to the public, which acquires, conserves, researches, communicates and exhibits the tangible and intangible heritage of humanities and its environment for the purposes of education, study and enjoyment".

This definition highlights how museum institutions are related to communication.

For the sake of completeness, about Italy, a further definition is provided by the Code of Cultural and Landscape Heritage. This law, in fact, in addition to defining the museum as "*a permanent structure that acquires, preserves, orders and exhibits cultural assets for purposes of education and study,*"¹ it continues, clarifying that the museums "*are intended for public use and carry out a public service.*"² In 2008, finally, the cataloguing activity was added as one of the museum's aims, further integrating the basic ICOM definition. It should be noted that the definition of "museum" elaborated by the ICOM and the fruit of national legislation are quite similar: they differ because of the fact that between the functions of the museum neither research nor delight is contemplated.

Although these two fundamental aspects have not been mentioned in the article of the Code that defines the museums, it should be pointed out that they are treated in the subsequent articles (117-120).

The aims of a museum can be divided into:

- acquisition, research and conservation of the material and immaterial testimonies of humanity;

¹Art. 101, Dlgs. n. 42, 22 January 2004, "Codice dei beni culturali e del paesaggio."

²Art. 101, comma 3, Dlgs. n. 42, January 2004, "Codice dei beni culturali e del paesaggio".

- display, enhancement and communication of their collections.

The historical reality highlights that until recently, the management of museum institutions was mainly oriented towards conservation, significantly neglecting the aspect of communication and usability in favour of the public.

Museum communication, concerning its educational and informational function, is contemplated by the National Charter of Icom museum professions only in 2006.

Communicating means making known, letting people know, and this must involve the greatest number of people.

A museum that does not communicate does not carry out its mission and, in fact, is not a museum.

The communication can be divided into macro-categories:

- visual communication (it is necessary to make a prior choice of what and how to exhibit);
- oral communication (for example, through guides, to which questions can be asked, but also employing multimedia supports such as audio guides);
- press communication (catalogues, captions, panels, educational cards, books, catalogues, periodicals, press releases, CDs, DVDs);
- interactive communication (through the use of websites, newsletters, web communications, electronic mail, social media, ordinary mail, fax, telephone, etc.);
- multimedia communication (i.e. the technology used within the "physical" museum).

In order to pursue its goals, museums today pay particular attention to interactive communication and multimedia communication through the use of new technologies, which allow interaction with the visitor, creating participation of the visitor, no longer passive, like in the past, but active.

It is very important for the museums to realize the aforementioned participation, to understand who they want to address, who the current public is and who the potential visitors are. Based on the information in their possession, and their appropriate analysis, the museum institutions can establish which are the ways to involve new "clients", to make them participate. Museums, in developing communication strategies aimed at achieving a greater number of "customers", must in no case lose sight of their mission.³

Each museum institution has a mission, and the mission cannot be changed to get more followers, a new audience or new visitors. It is essential to consider the fact that, in order to create real communication, understood in terms of effective participation, it is necessary to break down any barriers present. Therefore, a museum can use sophisticated technology. However, the same museum could not create real communication. It would pay so many exorbitant costs. However, it could not meet the needs of the masses.

It is not obvious that it comes to realise good communication because it is not accessible to most people.

Or think of a good website with interesting links, high-resolution images of the works of art inside the museum, with plenty of information on the works and their authors, all of a very high level but available only in English : also in this case communication uses technology but does not appear to be functional to the mission of the museum. In both cases, therefore, communication, aimed at the fruition of the "cultural good", is not oriented appropriately to ensure that the masses enjoy it.

Accessibility must instead be full for both regular visitors and new visitors. To obtain effective communication, it is, therefore, necessary to remove any barriers (which can be of various kinds, cultural, economic, social, etc.) which, at the moment considered, prevent customers from actually accessing.

In the analysis to be placed at the base of the communication, in the light of these considerations, it is necessary to proceed to the evaluation of the following:

What are the barriers at the time X ?;

What are the steps to be taken to eliminate these barriers as much as possible?

In developing the museum communication plan, stimulating and ambitious but not impossible goals must, therefore, be established. For example, returning to the example given above, regarding the website of excellent quality in terms of technology and content, it is clear that a museum increases access and usability to the site, thus implementing an effective communication if it provides for the possibility to select other languages. Clearly, being different the ways of communication that a museum can use, these must be adapted to the museum dimension

³Chong, Derrick, "Arts Management", Routledge, London, 2002, pp. 185-187; DOI: 10.4324/9780203865347

without expecting the impossible from the small local realities.

It is through communication that the museum realises the participation of the public that allows it to arrive at learning, which is an objective that museums must never forget.

Only in this way, the number of customers increases, the number of visitors increases, the number of followers increases.

In order to achieve its institutional cultural, educational and educational goals, the museum, like any other company, "attracts" "customers" by orienting its decisions in such a way as to satisfy visitors-customers, as well as to increase their number.

Marketing is therefore functional to the museum's cultural, educational and educational mission. Today, museums are marketing by giving, in a new way compared to the past, particular attention to the communication aspect.

The old approach characterised by considering museums as "chosen" as a status symbol of education has been abandoned.

For this reason, it is necessary that the communication strategy, performed by the museums, comes to consider more recipients in such a way that knowledge is effectively transmitted. Nowadays, museum institutions have to create different communication systems in order to be able to transmit different messages to each other according to the types of visitors with different contents and methods.

Communication must always remain how the museum can carry out its mission and never fall into the spectacle. "The Virtual Museum".

In everyday life, we increasingly hear of a "virtual museum".

But what does this term mean? We analyse the terms that are part of this expression, namely the term "museum" and then the term "virtual". Reading the definition provided by the Treccani vocabulary, we know that the term "museum" (from Lat. *Musēum*, gr. *Μουσῆιον* der. Of *Μοῦσα* "musa2" (prop. "Sacred place of the Muses") refers to the name of a cultural institute of the 'ancient Alexandria of Egypt, as well as the collection of works of art, or objects of historical and scientific interest ... Continuing the reading of the Treccani vocabulary, the word "virtual" [from the Latin lat. (of the scholastic philosophers) *virtualis*, deriving from *virtus* "virtue; faculty; power": virtual virtue], assumes the meaning, in philosophy, of potential, that is, "existing in power" (as opposed to actual, real, effective), in physics, as opposed to real, effective, it is said of entities or magnitudes that, even if they do not correspond to real objects or quantities, can be introduced or considered for specific purposes of calculation, representation or logical deduction.

At the beginning of the eighties, the concept of "virtual museum" was linked to the use of technology by the museum institution which, in that historical period, was limited to the digital representation of existing collections within it. For instance "In July 1991 the Micro Gallery opened in the National Gallery, London, a suite of PCs that visitors could use to access high resolution images and information about its paintings."⁴

In reality, in the beginning it was more of internal use, mainly of an administrative nature, excellent to inventory. Over time, even the simple inventory operation has led to the development of the idea that automation could present itself as an opportunity to be seized and strengthened in terms of communication strategy in order to encourage greater use of the contents of the museum.⁵

In the early years of the development of the "virtual museum", not everyone had the availability of a personal computer to consult at home, and even in the case in which it was available, only a few people still had the possibility of having the subscription to the internet network, at the beginning with high costs. For this reason, some museums have begun to create special rooms in which some computers containing their "virtual museum" were made available to visitors. The civic museums of the Municipality of Cagliari still present these locations.

This process of "virtualisation" has mainly affected contemporary art museums in sharp contrast to what happened concerning classical art museums. Thus various marketing operations were born by the museums which, based on the technologies of the moment. Think, for example, of the video cassettes, and then of the cd rom, and then again of the DVDs, through which the museum institutions have begun to communicate the contents of the collections physically present at their facilities.

In the years to come, the concept of "virtual museum" in the strict sense, so far outlined above, has been

⁴ Keen S., "Museums and the Digital: the view from the micro Gallery", 2014 BCS, DOI 10.14236/ewic/eva2014.14

⁵ [http://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/museo-virtuale_\(XXI-Secolo\)](http://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/museo-virtuale_(XXI-Secolo)), consulted on 5th January 2020

developed according to a different meaning that goes beyond the museum as a physical institution. Reference is made to the "virtual museum" relating to the works of a certain artist, or to the "virtual museum" of a certain artistic current (such as, for example, Impressionism), or to the "virtual museum" relating to a certain theme (for example, to the theme of violence against women, or to racism, or to sexual diversity, etc ...), that is a communication entity that is no longer linked to the physical museum as in the case of the "virtual museum" assumed in its closest accession .

Over time, museums have refined their "virtual museums" with increasingly dense content of information and curiosities that can be viewed not only more through personal computers, first available only at the physical site of the museum, and then using your own computer from the comfort of your own home thanks to more widespread use of home PCs and the massive use of the Internet also deriving from lower costs caused by the increase in demand, but also through the use of smartphones and tablets and therefore available for consultation everywhere as an e-museum.

Accordingly, "Internet users that visit the e-museum, are able to view the written and visual information, belonging to the artworks in the museum, are able to follow the virtual tour prepared for the different sections of the museum, are able to browse the artworks according to certain properties, are able to search the artworks having the similar visual content with the viewed art work."⁶

Museums have adapted to the technologies of the moment by following them as they progressed. It represents a sort of mandatory passage.⁷

In general, today the term "virtual museum" is given a broader meaning by considering both the technologies used within the physical museum and any other technology that pertains to the museum itself.

The mission of the museum, even the "virtual" one, remains that of conservation and dissemination. This means that the "virtual" museum in the strict sense does not clash with the "physical" museum, rather they complement each other. Over time, museums are facing an important moment characterised by the challenge of digital, which implies a real transformation not only of a merely technical-organisational type but also of a cultural type.

But what are the advantages that a cultural institution can obtain from this type of transformation? In order to be able to make a correct assessment in order to answer the question, it is necessary to consider the advantages and disadvantages involved. Certainly, with the use of technology, the museum can allow visitors to improve their personal experiences both inside and outside the museum, before or after the visit to the museum. Technology offers the public the possibility of coming into contact with the museum and the performing arts, not only during the visit but also before and even later.

Today, the museum can manage and exploit the relationship with, not only the actual customer, visitor or public but also the potential public.

Primarily, technologies make museums enjoy the following benefits:

- be closer to your user;
- personalisation of the visit about personal needs;
- active participation by the visitor (think for example of interactive installations);
- learning while having fun according to the form of entertainment;
- brings young people closer to museums.

The British Museum is probably the best example of a "virtual museum" as it is a museum that has shown that technology can effectively communicate by bringing into play so many interesting operations including the decision to put audio files online guide.⁸

The British Museum has decided, therefore, to give the possibility to anyone to download the audio guide files and have them on their mobile phones, and to be able to enter the museum and already have a detailed description of the works of art inside it. Some scholars see in the "virtual museum" both an opportunity and a limit. They believe that because it asks some specific skills. Unfortunately, not everyone has as in the case of the elderly who,

⁶ Alav O., Gudukbay, U., Yardimci, Y., Altıngövdü, İ.S., Aksoy, S., Bastanlar, Y., Cetin E., Akar, G.B.Cavus, Ulusoy, O., Aksay, A. "E-Museum: web-based tour and information system for Museums", DOI 10.1109/siu.2006.1659914

⁷ F. Antinucci, "Musei virtuali: come non fare innovazione tecnologica", Laterza, Bari, 2007, pag. 115.

⁸http://www.britishmuseum.org/visiting/planning_your_visit/audio_guides.aspx?lang=it; consulted on 11th January 2020

with difficulty, consult the websites of museums preferring the on-site visit to the physical museum directly. In fact, if on the one hand it can certainly be said that communication is greatly amplified reaching a large audience through the use of technology that allowed the creation of "virtual museums", on the other hand, it is also true that it meets numerous limits, linked to age-related factors, as well as economic factors, which make technology become an obstacle rather than an opportunity. Therefore, the opportunities that technology offers, in terms of communication to museum institutions, do not concern the whole population, and this represents a great limitation that contrasts with the very definition of a museum. Moreover, some see technology as an obstacle to the realisation of the museum mission as they would remove the potential visitor from the "physical" museum.

Conclusions

The current society is living in a historical context, of great changes that see technology as an important protagonist. In a modified context, museums have also had to adapt, transforming themselves from "islands" to "open systems" which, as such, are characterised by relational nodes. In this continuous change, the museum institutions have resorted to the opportunities offered by the technologies that are numerous in terms of communication. The digital challenge was, and is, rather complex and has affected the museum under a deeper profile linked to its identity. Communication must be able to combine cognitive content but also emotional needs following the needs dictated by the market-determined by museum visitors, both "physical" and "virtual" museums, according to the broader meaning of the term.

Although there are numerous opportunities related to communication through new technologies, at the same time, it is necessary to acknowledge the fact that there are also innumerable limits linked to the fact that, although they have a strong impact, they require continuous investments with the following need for huge cash outlays that must soon be replaced by different technologies that gradually become established on the market.

Some constraints limit the enjoyment of the cultural good by the entire population.

Most of them are due to age-related factors and economic factors that create large gaps between digital and non-native natives.

Furthermore, one wonders if technology really allows communication, understood as a fundamental characteristic of the museum, that is, as a means to transmit culture, or if, rather, people are more interested in technology and not in art, opening up a new debate concerning the prevalence of the interest of the mass for the medium rather than for the content. In fact, technologies are not the paramount goal of museums, such a star to show without any achievement for the general public.

However, technology must represent how a helpful tool which leads museum institutions in a path of growth. In this way, it can help to ensure that culture can be part of the everyday life of any person regardless of age and economic status.

The present discussion leads to the conclusion that, despite the limitations exposed, the technology opens up many opportunities for the dissemination of culture, and the purpose of transmitting the culture is also achieved in the case of young people who approach the museum because they are interested in technology rather than in the museum in itself, because, in any case, it represents an opportunity to stimulate their knowledge. In the light of the considerations set out, therefore, I conclude by stating that undoubtedly the use of technology is very demanding for museums, but, on the other hand, the relative feedback can only be positive.

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